

everybody: children with chocolate-stained faces and holes in the knees of their jeans, grey-faced housewives in outdated pantsuits, high school drop-outs in faded jeans and t-shirts—I studied all of them. There was an elderly couple putting their laundry in one of the dryers next to mine. The old woman reached down to pick up a towel she had dropped, but her body stiffened when her hand went below her knees. The old man, steadying himself with a black cane, tried to reach for the towel on the floor, but could not bend over far enough. The old woman laughed at him and tapped his arm. Without looking up, the man lifted the towel from the floor with the tip of his cane and poked it in the dryer. They both laughed. The old woman kissed his arm.

I looked back at him. He was still standing over the open washer full of clean water. He began to shake his head slowly. He looked paler and thinner from a distance as I noticed tears run down his face into the wash water. I drew my knees closer to my body. I looked at the children again, the housewives, the teenagers. The old couple was watching their laundry dry. My throat knotted. I flew out of the chair and grabbed my tumbling bedspread from out of the dryer. When I reached the parking lot, my heart was pounding. I couldn't bear to look back. I got behind the steering wheel and turned on the ignition while thanking God that I wasn't poor. I pulled out of the lot and glanced in my rear-view mirror. He was watching me from behind the glass. So were all of them. I started to choke.

"I'll never be poor! I'll never be poor!" I screamed. My hands trembled at the wheel. I looked at the limp and still damp bedspread beside me. It smelled fresh and clean. I looked at it and sobbed, fearing that I would never grow old or insane.

Mrs. Rudolph

by Anne Voegele

Mrs. Rudolph was the witchy old lady who lived next door.
She kept my brothers' baseball when it rolled in her yard.
Beyond the wooden fence, beyond the privacy she crept,
Waiting to pounce on the sphere of rawhide when it trespassed.
Her old black-framed glasses concentrated her stare at us
As we pedaled our bicycles past the back of her garden.
My brothers used to say that she practiced witchcraft.
I didn't believe them, but I kept my eyes open for flying brooms.
I always wondered what her backyard looked like.
No one had ever seen it but her—that's a scary thought.
She was not the type of woman you'd sell Girl Scout cookies to.